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Arms Pact Faces Senate Challenge In the Fall and an Uncertain Fate

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WASHINGTON, June 18 — The strategic arms treaty concluded today with the Soviet Union now faces long deliberation, with an uncertain future, in the United States Senate.

An official copy of the treaty will not be formally referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations until later in the month, and a full dress debate on the Senate floor will not begin until fall.

But looking ahead, Senator Jesse Helms, a conservative Republican from North Carolina, said: "Today we embark on what well may be the most significant national debate of our time."

Several tactical plans were evolving among those who strongly oppose the treaty and those who find it politically unacceptable in its present form.

Conservative Republican members are expected to coalesce behind a "package" of treaty amendments that Senator Jake Garn of Utah plans to offer, in what would amount to a substitute version of the accord that the Soviet Union would be likely to reject.

Baker May Offer Revisions

Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., the Republican Senate leader and a party moderate who will announce later this year his candidacy for the Presidency, is expected to advance a package of less sweeping treaty amendments.

Some Democratic members, including advocates of an arms limitation agreement, are expected to demand at least cosmetic changes in the treaty and its related documents.

Senator William V. Roth, Republican of Delaware, announced that he intended to offer an "understanding" to the treaty that would clarify the right of Washington to provide arms and technology to its allies. Mr. Roth, a conservative who is uncommitted on the treaty, said that some European allies were worried that the treaty would bar the transfer of such technology.

Ted Stevens, the Alaska Republican who is a declared opponent of the treaty, called it "a never-never land" and predicted that the Administration might field enough votes to block a filibuster against it but not enough for approval.

Alan Cranston, the assistant Democratic leader of the Senate, who supports the treaty, offer a different assessment of the vote lineup at this stage. He said he reckoned on 58 votes in favor, 30 opposed and 12 "totally undecided."

Senator Cranston said, announcing his endorsement "I believe the treaty enhances our security."

Ultimately, the Senate must vote on a "resolution of ratification" that would express consent to President Carter's act of ratification. That resolution must be adopted by a majority of the Senate, present and voting, or at least 67 affirmative votes if all 100 Senators are present.

Votes on suggested amendments,

reservations and other modifications in the treaty are decided by a simple majority.

Increasingly, Republicans and some Democrats are predicting that the treaty cannot achieve Senate consent without some amendment, or that it may fail outright. But even the most skillful and practiced nose-counters cannot say with certainty how the Senate will vote.

One reason for this is that 20 Senators entered the legislative body this year as freshmen, essentially unversed in the subject and mostly uncommitted. These first-term members are seen as one key to the outcome.

But they are only one of several keys. Among the other questions is uncertainty about who or what will prove influential or decisive in the outcome. White House sources believe that Senator Sam Nunn, Democrat of Georgia, will exercise considerable influence over other Southern Democrats. Mr. Nunn, a respected member of the Armed Services Committee, seems less dissatisfied with the treaty itself than with United States defense spending and readiness.

In a television interview yesterday, one of the Senate's most influential members, Henry M. Jackson, Democrat of Washington, said he would move that the treaty be returned to President Carter with instructions that it be renegotiated.

There is little difference between that plan and plans to amend the treaty on the floor, since substantive amendments can only be demanded by the Senate as a condition of approval and would require some renegotiation.

Numbers Objections to Pact

The objections to the treaty signed in Vienna today by Mr. Carter and Leonid I. Brezhnev are numerous.

One of the most important is that the treaty would, by essentially freezing present levels of weapons launchers, permit the Soviet Union to retain all 308 of its "heavy" missiles, called SS-18 in the West and RS-20 by the Russians. These are being re-equipped with 10 independently targeted nuclear warheads.

The United States has no "heavy" missiles, and for the immediate future would have Minuteman III light missiles armed with three warheads.

Another major objection is that the treaty does not count the Soviet TU-22M bomber, known in the West as Backfire, as an intercontinental heavy weapon.

The Soviet Union has agreed to restrict production of the plane to 30 a year. But some Senators want the bombers counted as part of the 1,320 weapons with independently targeted warheads permitted to each country.

Verification Is an Issue

The loss of American listening posts in Iran, and other factors, prompts some Senators to deny that the treaty is adequately verifiable and immune to possible Soviet cheating.

A tactical issue was given enhanced importance today when Senator Helms and Senator Garn, appearing at a news conference, demanded that the Senate floor debate be televised to give treaty opponents a forum roughly equivalent to President Carter's ready access to television.

Senator Robert C. Byrd, the Democratic leader, is likely to resist this idea. Associates suspect he sees it as a way for Senator Baker to "run for President on television while debating SALT." Advocates of the step said they would try to force a vote on the issue if necessary.

Senator Helms also called on Mr. Carter to instruct military, Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency witnesses "to be completely truthful and forthcoming with their views" on the treaty, even if those views conflict with those of the President.

Mr. Helms said military men should testify candidly even at the risk of harming their careers or of being rebuked.